



TO HEAL A NATION

by Joel L. Swerdlow

Photographs by David Grunfeld and Robert Hamilton

In March of 1979, Jan Scruggs, a 29-year-old former rifleman with pieces of North Vietnamese shrapnel still in his body, went to see a movie titled *The Deer Hunter*, notorious for its explicit depiction of death and cruelty in Vietnam. That night he couldn't sleep. At 3 a.m. he was alone in the kitchen with a bottle of whiskey.

"I'm going to build a memorial to all the guys who served in Vietnam," Scruggs told his wife the next morning. "It'll have the name of everyone killed."

Scruggs had no money, no political connections, and little experience other than combat and college study; yet, in less than three years, his dream was about to come true. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF), which he founded, had obtained two acres of land at the foot of the Lincoln Memorial, raised more than \$8 million, conducted the largest art competition in recorded history, and survived assaults from those who opposed the winning design: two black granite walls on which the names of America's 58,000 war losses were listed chronologically in order of their death.

These names have now become a permanent part of America's emotional landscape. Millions of people have visited; on some days, more than 20,000 people come. They are all ages, all political persuasions. Vets, nonvets, antiwar, prowar, and indifferent. Most touch the wall. Lips say a name over and over as fingertips trace letters.

Sunlight makes the Memorial warm to the touch. Young men put into the earth, rising out of the earth. You can feel their blood flowing again.

Each day someone leaves a flag, a flower, a snapshot, a memento, a poem, or a personal note. Visitors seem to be uplifted. For many, the names help heal emotional wounds left by a war that never really ended.

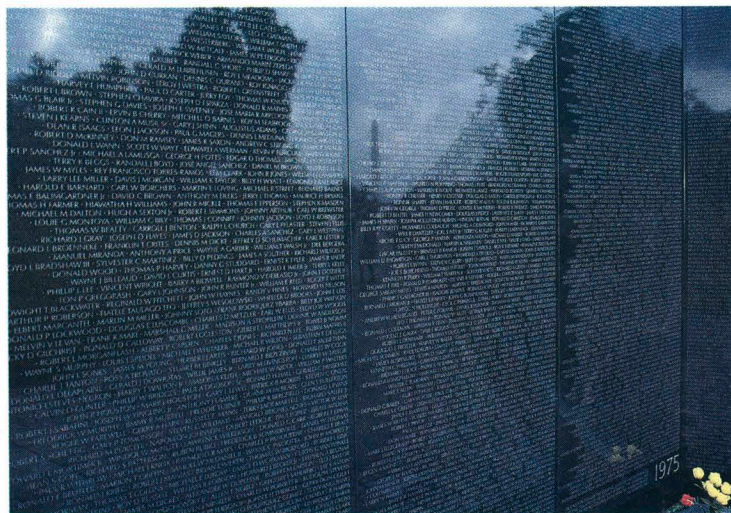
But in late July 1982, as the VVMF planned a simple ceremony to accompany installation of the first panel of names, no one realized just how powerful these names would be.



The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington has triggered an unprecedented national response that promises, at last, to resolve the bitter legacy of the Vietnam era. College campuses were once centers of opposition to the war, but many students are among those listed on the wall of names.

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Color photographs by David Grunfeld. Black-and-white photographs by Robert Hamilton.



Names are engraved on the 492-foot-long wall in chronological order of death, from 1959 to 1975. To help those looking for friends and relatives, names are listed alphabetically in books kept at the Memorial.

Once they knew which panel was being sent first, the VVMF tried to find the parents of GIs whose names appeared on it. They began by looking up names in the Washington and Baltimore telephone books. Most calls were wasted, but then they found a Gold Star Mother. "I loved him so much," she said. "Yes, of course, we'll be there. All of our family will be there."

On July 22, about 24 hours after the first panel arrived in Washington, several dozen reporters mingled with parents, family members, and vets who had heard about the upcoming ceremony.

Men working at the site took off their hardhats and stood silently as Emogene Cupp, whose son had been buried on his 20th birthday, released a rope that held a blue velvet sheet over the panel with 665 names.

Scruggs introduced the parents and announced who their sons were. Then each family walked up to the panel and left one long-stemmed red rose.

The families also did something unexpected. They touched the stone. Even a six-year-old girl walked calmly through the adults and reached up to an uncle she had never met. The touches were more than soft. They were gentle, filled with feeling—as if the stone were alive.

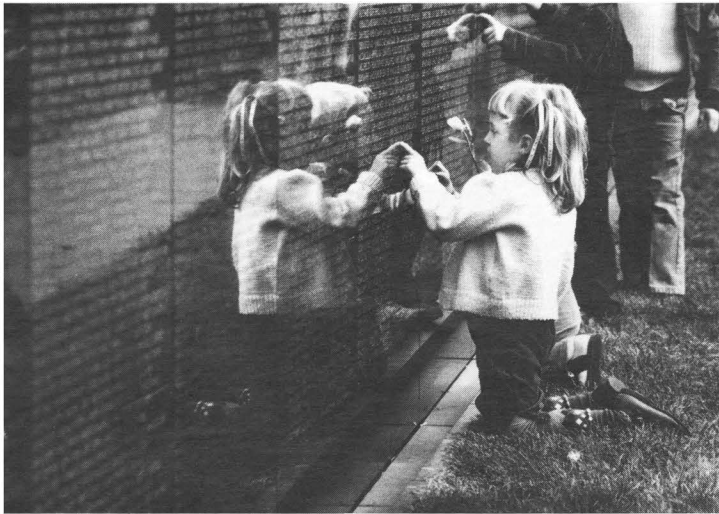
A day after the unveiling, columnist James J. Kilpatrick wrote about his walk through the mud to see the construction site: "Gradually the long walls . . . came into view. Nothing I had heard or written had prepared me for the moment. I could not speak. I wept. . . . This memorial has a pile driver's impact. No politics. No recriminations. Nothing of vainglory or of glory either. For 20 years I have contended that these men died in a cause as noble as any cause for which war was ever waged. . . . Never mind. The memorial carries a message for all ages:

"This is what war is all about."

Then Kilpatrick noted what was perhaps the Memorial's strongest attribute: "On this sunny Friday morning, the black walls mirrored the clouds of a summer's ending and reflected the leaves of an autumn's beginning, and the names—the names!—were etched enduringly upon the sky."

Workmen installing the remaining panels on the wall had a special problem. Whenever the gate opened to let a truck in or out, someone would try to sneak past the eight-foot construction fence. Once inside, they often refused to leave, even when warned they could get hurt.

Other people, many of whom had come from out of town, simply stood outside the fence waiting for a glimpse of the wall. Usually, construction workers made special



allowances for family members and vets. An older man explained that he wanted to see his son's name. He found it and stood there clear-eyed and staring. But when he recognized nearby names, people his son had mentioned in letters home, the man started to sob.

A Navy pilot in uniform brought a Purple Heart. "It belonged to my brother," he explained. "He and I flew together. I'd like you to put it in with the concrete that's being poured."

The pilot saluted as the medal disappeared into the wall.

Dedication of the Memorial was scheduled for Veterans Day weekend of 1982. Activities would begin with a vigil at which the name of every Vietnam fatality would be read. There would also be public hearings on veteran-related issues, unit reunions, a parade, and an official dedication ceremony.

"I will be in Washington for the dedication," one vet wrote to the VVMF. "I will not be there to tell tales of terror in the skies over Hanoi. I won't be representing anyone but a handful of ghosts whose blurry names and strangely boyish faces needed to be welcomed home."

A vet whose twin brother had died in Vietnam walked 1,255 miles to Washington.

A vet hitchhiking to Washington fell asleep and awoke at the airport with a paid round-trip ticket in his pocket.

A group of vets checked out of a VA hospital, penniless. A Congressional Medal of Honor winner took out a personal loan to rent a bus for them.

All across America, such buses—along with airplanes and car caravans—became rolling barracks, as the men drifted into Washington from Boston, Cleveland, Dallas, Denver, and San Francisco; and from Stroud, Okla.; Fergus Falls, Minn.; Jessup, Iowa; Bethel, Conn.; and all the other towns and cities whose sons had served.

"It was," a newspaper in Beaumont, Texas, noted, "as if they were all drawn by the same ghostly bugle."

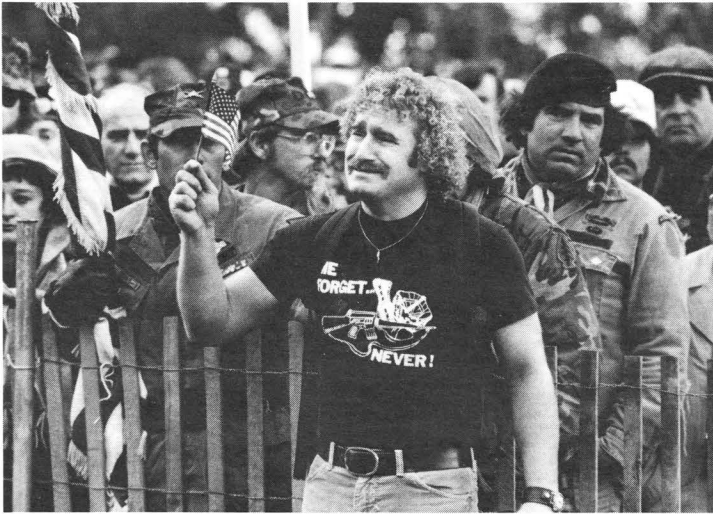
The Candlelight Vigil of Names, scheduled for Washington's National Cathedral from 10 a.m. Wednesday, Nov. 10, to midnight of Friday, Nov. 12, was a simple ceremony.

Volunteers worked in half-hour shifts reading the names throughout the day and night. Every 15 minutes there was a pause for prayer.

For weeks, volunteers had been practicing their allotted names. The hardest part was preparing not to cry, so that each name could be read loudly and clearly.

They were read in alphabetical order, from Gerald L. Aadland of Sisseton, S.D., to David L. Zywicke of Manitowoc, Wisc.

The polished granite surface reflects images of both the surrounding landscape and the visitors, drawing them into a special union with the wall. Visitors often embrace one another, leave personal offerings, and reach out to touch individual names.



Overcome by emotion during the dedication ceremony in 1982, a veteran waves a small American flag, then uses it to shield his face as he begins to cry.

Each name was like a bell tolling. Each ripped through the heart, into old wounds that could heal only after they were reopened.

Time slots when names would be read had been announced, so this bell could be heard across America. In Oklahoma, for example, at the exact moment her son's name was being said out loud, a woman stopped feeding her chickens and whispered a prayer.

A Medal of Honor winner who had volunteered to read names lasted five minutes before he broke down. He read the rest of the names on his knees.

All week the American people had been discovering the wall.

At night they used matches and cigarette lighters and burned torches of rolled newspapers to find names. Volunteers stayed until dawn passing out flashlights. One father struck match after match, and then said to his wife in a hushed voice, "There's Billy."

They always touched the names. Fingertips traced out each letter. Lips said a name over and over and then stretched to kiss it.

The panels of names were like mirrors. No matter how you looked at it, you always saw yourself reflected back among the names. No matter who you were, you could no longer deny that you shared responsibility. You realized that you had to learn from this war, and that you could not escape its pain. The wall challenged you to match the courage of the men who fought.

The vets had their own rituals of remembrance.

A vet carried a paper bag and a pack of cigarettes as he approached the wall. He found a name and took a beer out of the bag. He snapped open the beer, poured some on the ground, and drank the rest without pausing to breathe. He lit a cigarette, and smoked it slowly. Then he moved on to another name until the six-pack was gone.

One volunteer guide had her arm around a vet as she led him along the wall and showed him three names. The vet was shaking and crying. At a fourth name, he ran his fingers along the letters and cried out, "I loved him, and I love this wall."

A former medic searched for the name of a GI he had worked to save. Images of this man suffering had haunted the medic for years. "He lived! He lived!" the medic screamed. "I can't find the name."

Many vets went to the wall alone. They were afraid they would hate it and afraid of the memories it would bring back. The filth. The horror. The loneliness. The sadness.

After seeing the wall, however, they needed each other, so they gathered in little groups. Men who had been strangers cried together. Many hugged. You have to touch the wall, they said to each other. They had never before been more strong or more fragile.

Promises to friends that they would never be forgotten had now been kept.



At 5 a.m. on Saturday, Nov. 13, it was raining, with thunder and lightning. By six the rain stopped. The weather, however, remained cloudy, cold, and windy. About 15,000 Vietnam vets gathered for an old-fashioned parade down Constitution Avenue to the Memorial, which would be dedicated later that afternoon.

It was the largest parade in Washington since John F. Kennedy's funeral, and a parade like the nation had never seen before.

Men in wheelchairs led most state delegations. The vets who followed them had long and short hair, even ponytails. Some wore three-piece suits with shoulder patches attached by safety pins. Many wore faded, torn segments of uniforms. There were boonie hats, steel helmets, bowling team shirts, canes, crutches, wheelchairs, and vets pushing baby carriages.

Marchers gave V signs and thumbs-up signs. One clasped his hands above his head, shouting, "We're home! We're home!"

One Vietnam vet in an old uniform with a chestful of ribbons stood behind several rows of spectators. The marchers saw him, jumped across the barricade, and embraced him. In tears, he joined the parade.

At the end of the parade, many vets threw their hats in the air and cheered. "How do you explain the feelings when you embrace a brother and you feel your heart beat against his heart?" one said.

Another said, "I could almost hear the chains clinking as they fell off us."

An emotional crowd of over 150,000 gathered for the dedication. People climbed trees for a better view and pushed past guards to get closer to the wall.

"Wait," Scruggs said. "We've waited over ten years. We can wait another hour." The crowd cheered.

At 2:55 p.m., after speeches by public officials and representatives of veterans organizations, the crowd sang "God Bless America," and then paused for a moment of silence. "Ladies and gentlemen," Scruggs said, "the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is now dedicated."

Minutes later, the fences that had been erected for crowd control were crushed as the 150,000 surged forward to the wall, which waited like a pair of outstretched arms.

The people and the wall met.

Standing. Sitting in wheelchairs. Stretching up. Leaning over the top. Holding each other. Kneeling. Walking back and forth. Crying. Smiling. Staring. In silence. Talking. Weeping. Hugging. Discovering. Remembering. Promising.



Veterans visit the Memorial to seek out the names of fallen comrades and children leave tributes to relatives they never knew. For both, the wall offers a focus for personal grief and an insight into the tragedy of the war.



At one moment, three hands reached up to touch a name and then held on to each other as they were lowered.

Each person had a moment of discovery. To them, at that moment, the wall was alive, and in the midst of it all, a lone GI stood at the top of the wall, put a bugle to his lips, and played taps. The notes came out slow and strong, mournful and hopeful.

Later that evening, thousands of people were still there. The wall had been transformed—claimed by people with flags, wreaths, photographs, crosses, flowers, poems, notes, medals, personal items, and pieces of uniforms. The objects were tokens of grieving, of greeting, and of letting go.

On the weekend of Nov. 13–14, veterans and their families all over America took the pulpit to lead prayers for America's sons, for reconciliation, and for the country.

Around the country, the work of the Memorial was just beginning.

Vietnam vets were changing the way they felt about themselves; many experienced a healing, which, one vet said, "has been one helluva long time coming."

On his way home from the salute, one vet wore his Combat Infantry Badge, Purple Hearts, and other ribbons.

"What are those?" someone asked.

He explained each.

"Why are you wearing them?"

"I'm proud to be a Vietnam vet."

Friends and family members visited graves they had neglected for years. Neighbors asked questions and really seemed interested in the answers. Schoolteachers gave assignments that involved Vietnam. Speeches by civic leaders and politicians emphasized that service in Vietnam made young men community assets. Fellow workers surprised Vietnam vets by decorating their offices with flowers and flags.

One vet returning home from the salute walked into his house and set down his suitcase. His wife came running up from the basement. With tears in her eyes, she smiled and ran over and put her arms around him. "Welcome home," she said. "Welcome home."